

After nearly a year of on & off 'quarantine' I was desperately keen to get out of coastal NSW and head inland. I was craving a little more space, a few less bodies and something more unique than 'that' good ol' coastal track!

The plan was to visit my family in South Australia, before heading north to the Southern Flinders Ranges and enjoying a quick pit stop at Alligator Gorge within Mount Remarkable National Park. Then I would veer east across the border to start the 'NSW Outback adventure'.

To be clear, this wasn't a 'suped-up hardcore 4x4 bush bash road trip' and despite my vehicle having 4x4 capabilities, it really is more of a city bus. So, if you're reading this and wondering if this 'Outback Road Trip' is suitable for a sedan – my answer is yes, with conditions.

 *Access to Mungo National Park can be affected by wet weather.*

Mungo National Park


Located in southwest New South Wales and the land of the traditional owners – the Southern Paakantyi, Mutthi Mutthi and Ngiyampaa people – Mungo National Park is a World Heritage protected park of significant indigenous, cultural, anthropological and archeological importance – did I miss anything? Oh, it's absolutely beautiful too.

My first attempt to enter Mungo National Park was during a previous road trip with my father, however, heavy rains thwarted our plans and caused the roads to close due to flooding and softened terrain. Saddened, we had no choice but to return to Balranald and drown our sorrows by a campfire – ok, not so bad!

The weather was clear this time around and Mungo National Park was accessible but it's worth bearing in mind that even a small downpour can affect your plans.

 *The wind and rain have carved sculptures out of what was once a lush lake.*

The primary feature of the park is Mungo Lake – a once lush and resource-rich lake within the Willandra Lakes system. These days, it's a very dry and dusty landscape that is home to what seems like an endless trove of historical treasures. Details revealing the life and history of the lake and its inhabitants across an immense timespan. Each time rain falls on the lake's lunette area, or a strong wind blows, carved stones, bones and other artefacts are uncovered for the first time – potentially in tens of thousands of years.

 *The dry and windblown landscape reveals an ancient life.*

Many human remains have been discovered around Lake Mungo also; Mungo Man is the name given to a male body found here in 1974 and the bones are dated at upwards of 40,000 years old! Another, Mungo Woman is noted as the oldest known human cremation. An informative, ancient and spectacularly beautiful place that is well worth a visit. Just check the forecast ahead of time and during your trip as rain and flash flooding may trap you in or keep you out.

 *One of the 12 sandstone sculptures to admire at the Living Desert State Park.*

Broken Hill

Next was a quick restock of supplies in the historic outback town of Broken Hill – traditional land of the Wiljakali people. Established in 1883, Broken Hill is Australia's first heritage-listed city and oldest mining town. With its post-apocalyptic style landscape, the outback town and nearby Silverton, became the ideal backdrop for the 1979 blockbuster, Mad Max and its 1981 sequel. It has since played host to many other film sets with the tourist attractions to prove it, and while it is now the centre of a major pastoral district, Broken Hill also boasts a vibrant arts scene.

Situated just 9kms out of the city centre, the Living Desert State Park is home to a collection of 12 sandstone sculptures carved by artists from around the world. The 2400-hectare park is well worth exploring at length but if you are pressed for time, it's an easy drive to the sculptures followed by a short path that weaves its way around all 12 carvings.



The dry river bed now reveals many shades of ochre.

Mutawintji National Park

Driving approximately 2 1/2 hours northeast of Broken Hill will bring you to the rugged and breathtaking, Mutawintji National Park in Pantyikali Country. In 1998, this region became the first land to be returned to its traditional Aboriginal owners and was then leased back to the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service.

My primary objective with this stop was to experience the challenging Mutawintji Gorge Walk. Starting out as a dry riverbed path, the sandy ground quickly loosens and becomes a tough slog as the full force of the sun beats down from above. A little further in, that path all but disappears into thick vegetation – turning many people back. But if you persist for a few more kilometres, the seriously beautiful yet also slightly creepy, rocky gorge awaits. Why creepy? Well, the area is littered with bones – spines, legs, jaws, skulls.... add some intense heat from the sun and the place begins to feel like a dragon's den! The bones belong to feral goats that roam the area and I assume they must fall from time to time as they scale the rocky gorge.



The awe-inspiring beauty of Mutawintji Gorge makes the challenging trail worth it.

Despite the heat, the flies, the scattered bones and the long sandy walk along a disappearing track, the Gorge Walk was beautiful and certainly had a pretty neat endpoint. Just take water, a lot of water! And adding some electrolyte powder is also a good idea in these types of environments where there is a risk of dehydration.

Like Mungo, access to Mutawintji is subject to the weather and a bit of rain can sabotage the best-laid plans of ill-prepared visitors. The same advice applies – keep an eye on that BOM radar because once wet weather sets in, the roads will close.



An aerial shot of the opal shafts around Lightning Ridge resembles something otherworldly.

Lightning Ridge - Yuwaalaraay Country

After a brief stopover in White Cliffs – the town nearest to Mutawintji National Park, I

continued northeast another 10-hours to arrive at the 'home of the Black Opal'.

Lightning Ridge gained its nickname due to the very rare opal that only forms within the region. Spoiler, I didn't find any.

What I did find though was that the town lived up to its name by unleashing a mighty lightning storm upon my arrival! The weather was a real challenge on this trip, the rain fell regularly and it made many of the outback dirt roads impassable if they weren't already closed by the local authorities as a precautionary measure to preserve the unsealed routes. This meant some of the Lightning Ridge attractions were closed, unreachable or actually flooded.

I took shelter in the local bowls club and reassessed my plan while treating myself to a quick meal!

Some of the sandstone carvings found in the 'Chambers of the Black Hand'.
One that remained open was the Chambers of the Black Hand. The chambers are a Lightning Ridge favourite – a subterranean labyrinth of sandstone carvings in the remains of a failed opal mine. Down within the depths, you'll meet Yoda, Mr Bean, Medusa and many more eclectic characters – some spiritual, some pop culture and others of historical importance. Rain or shine, the chambers are well worth a visit and provide a welcome refuge from the elements above ground.

Lighting Ridge boasts many other unique attractions as well, including the Artesian Bore Baths, Bottle Houses, Pubs in the Scrub, and Amigo's Castle all worth a visit. The easiest way to do the rounds is to follow the coloured Car Door Tours that weave their way around the town. Each tour is differentiated by colour and includes a series of stops. Individual maps can be collected from the town's information centre.

One little tip, be prepared for disappointment at the Iron Church – unfortunately, the whole thing is a collapsed heap nowadays. And remember to browse the opal fields, either by yourself or book into a tour. You never know what you might find, but never ever walk backwards or you could find yourself falling down a shaft!

For those who don't fancy seeing the fields, there's also an easy access pile of rocks and dirt to trawl through just outside the information centre. I can speak from experience when I say there is opal hidden within that pile! I did find some, yes indeed – but it's highly unlikely that I'll be retiring on my \$0.10c opal find.

Nothing says 'The Outback' like red dirt!

This NSW outback road trip was an exciting one! The stormy weather, red dirt and heat made for a unique holiday adventure that I won't soon forget.

Everywhere was accessible with my two-wheel-drive sedan but a 4x4 certainly would have made it more comfortable. Add rain into the mix and having a 4x4 would have made a significant difference.

Check the forecast and plan your trip accordingly. Wear suitable footwear, take ample food, water, sun protection and warmth to cope with the temperature extremes in the Australian desert. Although it's rugged and isolated, the wild landscape, spectacular scenery, history and adventure will seduce you.

I covered four states and 5,708kms over 20 days. Now, that's what I call a road trip!



What outback adventures have you been on?

